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“THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’”

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MACAU NPC REPRESENTATIVES CALL FOR EASING OF RULES ON FOREIGN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN THE GUANGDONG-MACAU COOPERATION ZONE IN HENGQIN

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GOV'T TO CLARIFY GAMING PROMOTERS' ROLE BY LEGISLATION: AL COMMITTEE

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DUTERTE READY TO BACK US IF IT GETS EMBROILED IN WAR

▲ P7



AP PHOTO



Finland's president says he is due to talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin by phone today. Sauli Niinistö said yesterday it is important to keep talking with Moscow to achieve peace in Ukraine through diplomacy and prevent the war from spreading elsewhere in Europe.

AP PHOTO



Poland U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is praising the Polish people for taking in more than 1 million refugees since Russia invaded Ukraine. Harris made the comments yesterday as she met with Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and hours after the U.S. House passed a massive spending bill that includes aid for Ukraine and its European allies. The legislation includes \$6.8 billion to care for refugees and other economic help.

AP PHOTO



UK The government said it is introducing a new system letting Ukrainians into the United Kingdom, after coming under heavy criticism for not doing enough to help those fleeing the Russian invasion. Fewer than 1,000 visas have been granted so far, out of more than 22,000 applications for Ukrainians to join their families in the U.K.

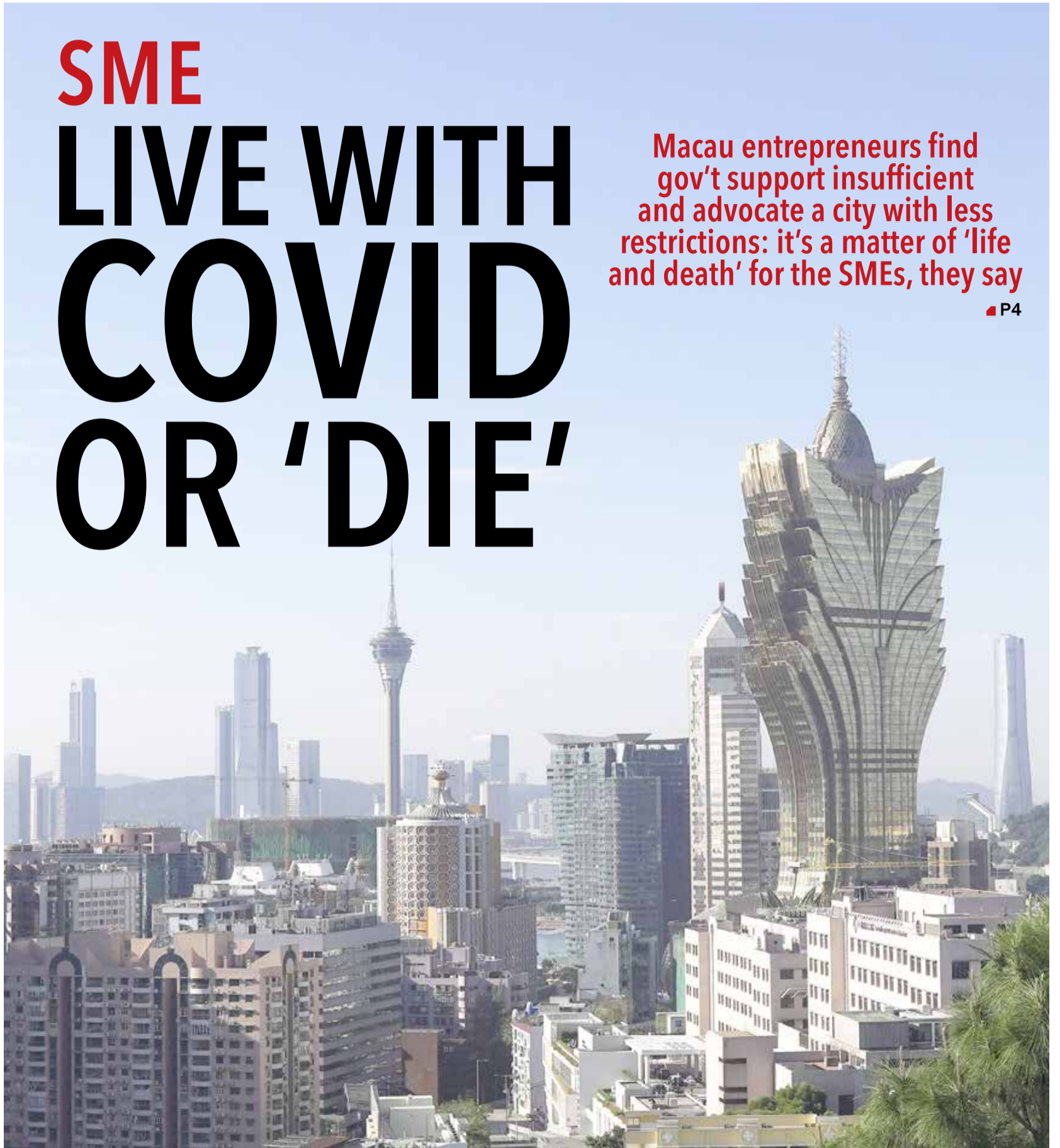
UK Two British directors on the board of Chinese telecom equipment giant Huawei's British subsidiary have quit, with news reports saying the resignations were prompted by the company's failure to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Sir Andrew Cahn and Sir Ken Olisa resigned. Sky News, citing unidentified sources, said Cahn and Olisa had urged Huawei to criticize Putin "but the company refused."

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SME LIVE WITH COVID OR 'DIE'

Macau entrepreneurs find gov't support insufficient and advocate a city with less restrictions: it's a matter of 'life and death' for the SMEs, they say

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ENVIRONMENT

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OLD TREES IN TAIPA STIR CPU DEBATE

RENATO MARQUES

A group of 10 trees, said to be over 100 years old, were the subject of debate at yesterday's meeting of the Urban Planning Committee (CPU).

The trees are located by the side of the road in Caminho das Hortas street in Taipa, in an area known as Cheong Ka Village.

The debate over whether to preserve the trees resulted from discussion of an

Urban Conditions Plan (PCU) for a private land plot located in the area.

In an explanation of the plan by the Land, Public Works and Transport Bureau (DSSOPT), it was mentioned that there were 10 trees on the land and in the contiguous area, so the land owner should submit a plan for the protection of trees to the Municipal Affairs Bureau (IAM).

The IAM representative at the CPU immediately intervened to clarify that the trees are not inside the plot of land, but on the roadside. The need to establish a plan to protect them is indirectly related to the land plot because, according to the Urban Plan for the North of Taipa, the government aims to widen this narrow road to become an important new road link in Taipa, connecting to the Avenida de Guimarães and Avenida de Sun Yat Sen at the Sun Yat



Sen roundabout.

According to the IAM representative, it is the widening of the existing road that poses a risk to the trees. The IAM has therefore expressed a wish to change the current plan.

The change would involve a modification of the area reverting to the government, from the mentioned land plot, for the purpose of the construction of the new road.

Committee member and lawyer Álvaro Rodrigues reminded the members that the debate is over privately owned land and not a concessional land plot.

"I don't think the government can do anything to force private [owners] to develop these [plots of] land. It's not a concession. So, I think [owners] can do whatever they want. The government cannot expedite their development," Rodrigues said.

This came after another member, Choi Wan Sun, called on the government to accelerate the development of land located in this area of Taipa Island.

The IAM representative, Lo Chi Kin, insisted on the bureau's intention to modify the project to protect the trees, stating that "there are bigger values to protect."

Although understanding the need to protect the trees, the

members, in general, did not show much support for Lo's contention that the only solution would be to change private projects according to the needs of the government. They called on the IAM to find other solutions, such as moving the trees to the green corridor that is also planned for the area.

The topic sparked the most heated debate of the day, provoking an even broader discussion than the PCU for land plots C1 to C4 of Nam Van Lake.

To break the deadlock, the CPU president, and acting director of DSSOPT, Wong Chiu Man, decided that the PCU for the land plot would be considered provisionally approved, with a promise to negotiate with IAM at a later date to find a better solution for tree protection.

"Although there is technology to move the trees and replant them in another place, the risk of [this] procedure is very high for the trees' survival and should not be done (by law) unless there is a great reason of justified public interest involved," Wong said.

The development on the land was approved, with conditions, for the construction of two residential towers with a maximum height of 90 meters. Following these conditions, the landowner would have to cede to the government around 1,700 square meters of land, from the total area of 3,762 square meters, to be used for new road links, access and public space.

Macau NPC reps call for easing of rules on foreign domestic workers in Hengqin

MACAU PHOTO AGENCY



LYNZY VALLES

MACAU representatives at the National People's Congress have called for support of Hong Kong and Macau residents living in the Guangdong-Macau In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin being allowed to hire foreign domestic workers.

According to Chinese media reports, the representatives are calling for a scheme that allows for the employment of domestic workers by Hong Kong and Macau residents living in Hengqin.

They are also calling on the government to legalize designated domestic agencies to facilitate the employment of domestic helpers from the Philippines in accordance with the law.

The agencies can help domestic workers obtain legal work visas, "maximizing the satisfaction of the living needs of Macau residents and creating favorable conditions that are convenient for Macau residents to live and work."

Meanwhile, the representatives said that the Macau New Neighbour-

hood and Hengqin comprehensive livelihood project built in Hengqin will be completed and come into operation in the first half of 2023.

There will be more than 4,000 Macau families living in Hengqin. At present, mainland policy on foreign domestic workers is not fully liberalized.

In Macau, bringing in foreign domestic workers is still not an option despite the shortage of such workers in the region.

Authorities have reiterated that the foreign domestic workers favored by employers in Macau are mostly from high-risk countries and that bringing them in to work in communities in Macau would pose high risks.

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Gov't to clarify gaming promoters' role by legislation, to be passed by Aug. 15

ANTHONY LAM

THE government has told a parliamentary committee that a law will be made to codify the role of gaming intermediaries, Chan Chak Mo, president of the committee, revealed yesterday.

The Second Standing Committee of the parliament is taking part in the legislative process for the Gaming Law Amendment Bill.

After yesterday's meeting, Chan held a press conference to discuss the session. The press conference was also attended by Secretary for Economy and Finance Lei Wai Nong and other officials.

Chan told the press conference that the government had pledged to clarify the role of each type of gaming promoters through legislation. Currently, these are codified in the form of Executive Regulations.

As the bill proposes provisions distinct from those cur-

SIMON ZHU



rently stipulated in the law, the government has agreed to transform the Executive Regulations codifying the qualifications and rules for gaming promoters' businesses into legislation.

The parliamentary committee was told that the future law will clarify the scope of business of each individual intermediary, management company and collaborator. The law must be pas-

sed by the parliament before August 15 this year, which is the end of this legislative session.

Meanwhile, the bill proposes that gaming concessionaires can pay only management fees to management companies. The former will not be allowed to share profits with, or pay commissions to, the latter.

Some committee members found the concept of manage-

ment companies to be poorly defined. In response to that concern, according to Chan, Secretary Lei explained that management companies will only "manage" casinos, for example, providing security services. As such, they can only receive management fees from concessionaires. The right to operate casinos remains with concessionaires. Under the bill, management contracts would need to be approved by the Chief Executive.

The meeting also discussed corporate social responsibility, a concept proposed in the bill. Some lawmakers requested clarification as to whether more detailed provisions could be included in this regard.

In response, the government admitted the difficulty of specifying corporate social responsibility in detail in the bill. However, it welcomes bidders for casino licenses to make relevant suggestions as part of their proposals.

With respect to labor rights, some lawmakers questioned

why a Labor Creditor's Rights Protection framework has not been proposed for inclusion in the bill. Although government officials pointed out that proposals on labor rights have been included in Article 3 of the bill, lawmakers expressed a hope that provisions for Labor Creditor's Rights Protection would be included in the future.

Labor Creditor's Rights Protection refers to the safeguarding of workers and family members of workers who die as a result of accidents at work or other occupational causes. The government has established a fund for this purpose.

Yesterday's meeting also covered the proposal for a maximum number of concessions. Some lawmakers asked why there is no proposal for a minimum number, to which government officials replied that the absence of such a restriction will offer the government greater flexibility. The bill proposes that no sub-concessions are to be allowed in the future.

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Rui Carreiro



Cristiana Figueiredo



Nelson Rocha

‘MACAU SHOULD LIVE WITH COVID-19. IF NOT, SMES WILL DIE’

JING WU

WHAT the government considers helpful for struggling small and medium enterprises (SMEs) might end up being just another burden for business owners, as they are faced with mounting debts and insufficient income to make repayments.

Several local business owners have said they fear applying for government loans due to the unpredictable state of Covid-19 in Macau.

Amid the economic fallout caused by the pandemic, the government has launched a new set of support measures for struggling SMEs and low-income residents.

One of the programs – the Bank Credit Interest Rebate Plan for Small and Medium Enterprises – is temporarily open, providing an interest rebate of up to 4% in the form of bank credits to SMEs for three years. Applications for the scheme are open for 12 months. SMEs that have been in operation for less than one year are eligible to apply for an eight-year government loan of up to MOP600,000.

However, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to threaten local businesses, business owners have expressed to the Times a view that government support is insufficient to keep their businesses viable, and they have had to find alternatives to gain income in order to survive.

Chief Executive Ho Iat Seng has encouraged workers to adjust their mentality, so as to “try a different profession according to their own aptitudes.”

This comes after local workers have reported difficulties in finding a new career.

Heeding the CE’s call is Rui Carreiro – a former vegetarian restaurant owner who is now an exclusive barber.

Carreiro told the Times that he had to close the restaurant because of the pandemic’s impact upon Macau. While subsidies were available, an SME loan was not an option for him because he did not want to risk being unable to repay the loan should the return on investment in his business be too low.

Another factor is Macau’s stringent border measures.

“The government does not give any funds to SMEs, we need to pay back, it is debt. I don’t know when Covid will end unless Macau lives with it and opens the border,” said Carreiro.

“If we applied for the loan, we only could survive for one year [...] The government should help to reduce the rent, as the rent in Macau is too expensive,” the entrepreneur added.

His vegetarian restaurant paid MOP30,000 per month in rent – a whole month’s profits.

Currently, his barbershop costs MOP10,000 in rent – which he says is “manageable.”

“Before the pandemic, we had many customers [and] lots

of tourists, from the mainland, Taiwan, Korea and Japan,” Carreiro recalled.

“The border has been closed for two years, and last year many people left Macau. People got fired; the whole crew of [water-based stage production] The House of Dancing Water was closed; and locals don’t spend too much anymore,” he said, suggesting that “Macau should live with Covid-19. If not, SMEs [will] die.”

Another entrepreneur, the former owner of CuppaCoffee Cristiana Figueiredo, said that the pandemic is one of the reasons that she changed her profession. Currently, she is exploring a career in interior design.

Last year, after struggling financially since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, CuppaCoffee café announced that it would close its doors on December 30.

However, new entrepreneurs bought the business.

Figueiredo said that CuppaCoffee had previously applied for government funds over the past few years. But, amid the pandemic, she decided not to apply for further funds, as she did not want to be left with more debt as sales decreased.

“Before we needed the business to grow, [and] we could pay it back. But for the last year, to have [less] business [than] you want, and then to get more debt [for] the business, we couldn’t see it was the right policy for us,” Figueiredo said.

The staple coffee shop in Taipa – which has a branch in the Macau Peninsula – has been operating for 14 years. Although the coffee shop mainly catered to locals, the store saw a decline in revenue during the second year of the pandemic.

She said that the store was not getting enough income in the second year of Covid-19 due to many of her regular customers leaving Macau, salary cuts among locals and an increase in the unemployment rate.

“When you work a lot, you want reward for your work. In terms of finances, all the work that I was [doing], it was too much for the reward what I was getting,” she lamented.

“All the work, all the puzzles, such as license renewals, the issues you need to solve when you have a business, I was not getting enough income,” Figueiredo added.

Macau is implementing a “zero-Covid” strategy, hence border measures remain strict and there is a requirement to quarantine despite being vaccinated – unlike other countries, which are aiming to “live with Covid.”

The strategy is one of the reasons why Nelson Rocha, manager and co-owner of Mariazinha, did not apply for an SME loan.

Rocha explained to the Times that Mariazinha catered mostly to locals, with 75% to 80% of its revenue coming from the local community.

However, following the pan-

demical fallout, “we found that a lot of our regular customers don’t come as frequently, or when they come, they don’t spend as much because the middle class is struggling. They had salary cuts by half – or some even got fired – so people are not as keen to go out and spend money,” Rocha said.

“We have been losing money every month. We may [have to] close the restaurant [...] soon. If we applied for the loans, we only could keep the business for [another] three to four months,” he said.

The government says that the SME support “will help to enhance the liquidity of SMEs and at the same time effectively reduce their interest burden.”

However, entrepreneurs such as Rocha feel otherwise, due to the burden of repaying debt while having little revenue.

He called on the government to support the workers’ salaries as has happened in other countries, relieve the pressure on small businesses struggling to pay their monthly expenses, and regulate rent increases to reasonable amounts.

According to the Monetary Authority of Macao, in the second half of 2021, new SME credit approved by Macau banks totaled MOP12.1 billion, a drop of 37.5% from the first half of the year.

Since the start of the pandemic, authorities have repeatedly made adjustments to the budget, using some MOP100 billion from the vast local financial reserves to compensate for increased expenses in the form of economic stimulus aimed at countering the impact of the pandemic.

COVID-19

Gov't: No plans to change quarantine period or border-crossing NAT validity

ANTHONY LAM

THE government has no plans to change SARS-CoV-2 nucleic acid test (NAT) requirements or quarantine durations for entrants to Macau, local health officials said yesterday.

At yesterday's weekly health press briefing, public health doctor Leong Iek Hou, division head for infectious disease prevention and control at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), was asked why the quarantine duration for entrants from Hong Kong remains at two weeks, even when the number of cases there reaches new heights each day.

Leong said that the government is constantly evaluating the risks posed by each place, and in people travelling to Macau from these places.

"Quarantine durations are adjusted or [not adjusted] as per the results of our evaluations," Leong said.

She added that arrivals from Hong Kong need to monitor their own health conditions for seven days following the end of their



quarantine. During their third week in Macau, they will have a yellow health code and be unable to enter a number of venues, such as government offices.

"Four NATs will be conducted during the third week, namely on the first, second, fourth and seventh days of the week," Leong stressed. "This is to strike a balance between their quarantine duration and early intervention if they get infected."

When asked about the possibility of shortening quarantine durations for entrants from outside the Greater China region, Leong reiterated the position of "constant evaluation."

Responding to questions on NAT validity for entrants from mainland

China, Leong remarked that there are scattered cases in various places across the country, and as close to Macau as Guangdong province.

"The risks to Macau are actually on the rise," she said. "Therefore, for the time being, we have no plans to change the validity period of NATs for border crossing."

Work to trace the source of infection for the recent Tanzhou patient, who contracted the Omicron variant, has been undertaken by governments in Macau, Zhuhai and Zhongshan, Leong said.

However, the work has yielded no useful results. "We hope this is only an isolated incident," Leong said.

Nucleic acid tests have

been conducted on specific groups of people, with no positive results detected.

Some people have missed tests, Leong disclosed, as they are or were not in Macau.

At yesterday's briefing, Luis Gomes, acting department head for non-tertiary education at the Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ), discussed children's vaccination and vaccination of

the elderly extensively.

Gomes announced that his bureau is collaborating with the Social Welfare Bureau (IAS) to jab the elderly. The DSEDJ, he said, encourages older Macau residents to get vaccinated.

Students will be given extra encouragement in class to convince the elderly in their households to get vaccinated. Vaccinated students will also be taught to use themselves as examples to encourage elders to get their shot.

Youth volunteers, meanwhile, will host outreach booths this weekend across the city to promote immediate vaccination to senior citizens. "Correct information will also be distributed to elders," Gomes said. These volunteers will also be deployed to vaccination stations to assist seniors with the process.

16,000 students aged three to 11 years have received a Covid-19 vaccine, which is 12,000 more than in February, when the DSEDJ initiated an incentive campaign for children's vaccination, Gomes said.

He added that government will continue to send outreach teams to jab students on campus. Additionally, the DSEDJ will organize school excursions for students to attend vaccination stations.

Child-specific vaccination slots have been arranged at the Macau Forum vaccination station, with 1,500 children getting jabbed at that venue last weekend. The arrangement will continue this weekend.

Leong confirmed that child-specific doses of mRNA vaccine should be expected in the second quarter of this year.

CRIME

TWO RESIDENTS LOSE OVER HKD4.6M IN CRYPTOCURRENCY INVESTMENT SCAMS

RENATO MARQUES

TWO local women in their early forties have reported an aggregated loss that amounts to over HKD4.6 million in two similar scams involving alleged investments in cryptocurrency, the Judiciary Police (PJ) said yesterday during the regular joint press conference of the Macau police forces.

According to the PJ spokesperson, both women alleged that they had been approached by a man on a social media platform who befriended them and soon after offered to help them make money through

an online cryptocurrency investment platform.

In both cases, the women downloaded a mobile application (app) through which they could invest and manage their accounts.

In the first case, a 41-year-old woman was said to have made a total of 21 investments, 10 of them in renminbi and another 11 in Hong Kong dollars. Together, these investments amounted to an equivalent of HKD4.2 million.

All seemed to be going according to the plan until the woman decided to withdraw her investments.

At that time, she alleged she was informed by an app manager that since her account balance was over USD300,000 she would have to pay a 25% fee in taxes.

At this point, she realized that she had been scammed and reported the matter to the PJ.

In the second case, a 40-year-old woman invested some HKD405,000 in a similar scheme from which she was not able to withdraw any funds as she lost contact with the person who introduced her to the scheme, prompting her to file a complaint with the PJ.

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NPC

HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASE SPARKS GOVERNMENT RESPONSE IN CHINA

HUIZHONG WU

SUSTAINED, palpable anger in China over the case of a mother of eight found chained inside a shed has prompted an unusually strong government response to human trafficking at the annual session of China's legislature.

The issue even merited a brief mention by China's premier Li Keqiang in his annual report on government performance delivered Saturday. That marked part of a direct attempt by a government not often given to responding to public pressure to address the widespread outrage.

Local governments have announced crackdowns on the practice of trafficking vulnerable women in the vast country, while the Public Security Ministry is pursuing a nationwide anti-trafficking campaign aimed at solving a backlog of cases, to be carried out by all levels. On Tuesday, China's top prosecutor, Zhang Jun, announced his department would "strictly enforce" laws against abduction and trafficking.

The woman found on the outskirts of the eastern city of Xuzhou had been trafficked multiple times and had eight children by the man who ultimately purchased her.

State media reported that at least half a dozen proposed legal reforms on the issue were brought by members of the National People's Congress and its consultative body, which are holding their annual sessions this week in Beijing.

A proposal from delegate Jiang Shengnan would raise criminal penalties in trafficking cases so that the buyer would face the same penalties as the seller, according to state newspaper Beijing Youth Daily.

"Appropriately increasing the penalty and increasing the criminal penalty for buying will play a certain deterrent effect," Jiang was quoted as



Delegates leave after the opening ceremony for the National People's Congress

saying by the paper.

Activists have welcomed the response, though some question whether the focus on heavy criminal penalties is the best approach to take.

"I personally think all of these proposals are positive, and they are meaningful," said Feng Yuan, co-founder of Beijing Equality, a group that focuses on gender-based violence.

"But I think they are missing some important angles," Feng said, because the proposals she saw have been too focused on the buyers' criminal penalties.

Under current Chinese criminal law, those who traffic women or children can be sentenced to between five and 10 years in prison, and even a death sentence. Purchasers can be sentenced to no more than three years.

Jiang's proposal also included the prospect of a follow-up mechanism after victims are rescued from trafficking. Others called on local governments to correctly identify trafficking victims who may have been registered under false names, create a nationwide alert system for

kidnapping and trafficking, and increase criminal penalties.

Authorities did not respond to a request to interview NPC delegates, including Jiang. A similar request for members of the advisory body the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference was declined.

NPC delegates do not directly draft legislation, although their proposals are passed on to the appropriate ministries. The body's Standing Committee, aided by legal experts, actually writes the laws.

The chained woman's plight ignited a public demand to ensure a crackdown on trafficking. According to Zhang's 2022 report, the number of people charged annually with trafficking women and children declined from 14,458 in 2000 to just 1,135 people last year. However it's unclear if the decline in the number charged is due to less trafficking or due to looser enforcement.

A desire to quiet and divert public anger while China was hosting the Winter Olympics last month may have been a factor in the government's response.

"They don't want this case to suck up all the air," said Dali Yang, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. "So there's clearly an interest in, ideally, resolving it in a way that it would disappear."

Yang said proposals to address the issue appeared to be politically "within the realm of acceptability."

Feng, the women's rights activist, urged the government to look at reform beyond criminal penalties. More urgent issues include verifying a victim's identity, helping them live independently after rescue and providing resources for mental health and physical recovery, she said.

Among activists' concerns is whether those rescued will be able to register for public services such as health insurance because they had been given new names and household registrations in the places to which they had been trafficked.

"I hope these points can also attract attention," Feng said.

China's Cabinet addressed some of those issues in an April 2021 document, including verifying marriage registrations and increasing anti-trafficking education in remote areas. New measures seek to give these initiatives a boost.

Trafficking is fed in part by a large gender imbalance resulting from China's former one-child policy.

"The logic of constructing a family as being the most important thing in a way overrides concern about where someone came from," said Johanna Ransmeier, a professor at the University of Chicago who studied the history of human trafficking in China.

Ultimately, such underlying attitudes need to change for a solution to be found, Ransmeier said.

"It's distressing that this remedy is purely about punishment, and not about social change," she said. **MDT/AP**

Beijing eases control to let ruble fall faster against yuan

CHINA is easing government exchange rate controls to let the Russian ruble fall faster in value against the Chinese yuan to help insulate Beijing from economic sanctions on Moscow.

The margin by which the ruble is allowed to fluctuate against the yuan in state-controlled daily trading will be doubled in size to 10% above or below the day's opening price starting today, the China Foreign Exchange Trade System announced.

The ruble has lost about 40% of its value since Western governments cut off some Russia banks from the international SWIFT payment system in retaliation for President Vladimir Putin's Feb. 24 attack on Ukraine. Russia's central bank was blocked from using its foreign currency reserves to defend the exchange rate.

China has avoided joining other governments in criticizing Putin's attack and has criticized Western sanctions. Chinese companies give no sign they are joining Western counterparts in pulling out of Russia, but economists say they are likely to try to take advantage of pressure on Moscow to try to strike better deals.

Holding the exchange rate steady would require China's central bank to subsidize Russian buyers of Chinese goods by giving them more yuan for their rubles than market forces said Moscow's currency was worth.

The latest change would allow Chinese exchange rates to keep up with the ruble's abrupt daily fluctuations. **MDT/AP**

TAIWAN MINISTER: CHINA WAR A DISASTER REGARDLESS OF OUTCOME

A conflict with China, which threatens to invade Taiwan, would be a disaster for all sides regardless of the outcome, the island's defense minister said yesterday.

China has largely backed Russia in invading Ukraine, a conflict that has echoes in Beijing's approach to Taiwan, the self-go-

vernment island democracy that it claims as Chinese territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

"Nobody wants a war," Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng told reporters. "It really has to be thoroughly thought over."

"If you really went to war, it would be disastrous for all," Chiu said. He said

Taiwan's defense establishment "watches and listens but we keep our mouths shut. We are following developments and preparing ourselves but we don't openly discuss or debate."

At the annual meetings of China's legislature, the National People's Congress, and its advisory body this week in Beijing, dele-

gates criticized what they called foreign influence and separatism in Taiwan while increasing China's legal and financial might to counter Taiwan support.

On Wednesday, a spokesperson for the People's Liberation Army delegation at the NPC said, "Separatist activities and collusion with external

forces are the root cause of the current tension and disturbance in the Taiwan Strait."

Col. Wu Qian blamed Taiwan's ruling pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, adding that, "The more the United States and Japan make waves on the Taiwan question, the tougher actions we will

take to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Wu also defended a defense budget increase, saying China has "maintained reasonable and steady growth to tackle complex security challenges and fulfill China's responsibility as a major country." **MDT/AP**

Japan cautiously welcomes South Korean president-elect

MARI YAMAGUCHI, TOKYO

JAPAN'S government yesterday welcomed the election of a new president in South Korea who supports stronger ties with Washington and Tokyo, as officials and experts expressed hope for an improvement in badly strained relations.

Yoon Suk Yeol, a conservative former top prosecutor and foreign policy neophyte, was elected president on Wednesday to replace outgoing liberal Moon Jae-in, under whose leadership bilateral relations sank to their lowest level in years because of disputes over wartime history.

"Japan-South Korea relations are in a very severe condition, and we cannot leave them as they are," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters yesterday.

"Healthy ties between Japan and South Korea are indispensable for the peace, stability and prosperity of the world," especially as it faces difficulties such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he said. "Cooperation among Japan, the United States and South Korea is also important."

Kishida, however, said Japan will stick to its stance that all wartime compensation issues with South Korea were settled by a 1965 treaty, which he said is the



South Korea's president-elect Yoon Suk Yeol

basis of friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries. He said it is crucial for South Korea to "keep the promises between the nations."

"I believe it is important to communicate with the new president and his new administration in order to restore healthy relations based on Japan's consistent position," Kishida said. "I hope to hold talks with the new government as I watch its actions."

Relations between Tokyo and

Seoul deteriorated sharply after South Korean courts ordered Japanese companies to pay reparations to Korean laborers over abuses during World War II, when Korea was a colony of Japan. Another sticking point is Korean "comfort women" who were sexually abused by Japanese troops during the war.

Japan insists that all compensation issues were settled under the 1965 treaty and that the South Korean court orders violate international law.

Yoon said yesterday that the two countries should focus on the future.

"The focus in South Korea-Japan relations should be finding future paths that would benefit the people of both countries. During this process of future-focused cooperation, we also need to come together and discuss, find the truth and resolve issues related to the past," he said.

Japanese officials and experts expressed relief that the new South Korean leader has advocated a

stronger alliance with the United States and a tougher stance on North Korea, but said the leadership change may not result in a quick fix.

Rui Matsukawa, a lawmaker for Japan's conservative governing party and a former diplomat, welcomed Yoon's victory and South Korea's return to conservative leadership, noting his willingness to improve bilateral relations. "I expect realistic diplomacy that looks to the future rather than the past," she tweeted.

But Masahisa Sato, a senior lawmaker in charge of the governing party's Foreign Affairs Division, cautioned against high expectations.

"We should abandon a fantasy that a conservative's victory can mend Japan-South Korean ties that have suffered multiple bone fractures," he said. Conservative leadership is "better than the opposition, but there is no change to the fact that the ball remains in the South Korean court."

Although both Japan and South Korea are military allies of the U.S. and share common concerns over North Korea and China, their ties have suffered from the legacy of Japan's World War II actions.

"We can expect (Yoon) to try to compartmentalize addressing historical issues and working together on mutual challenges," said Duyeon Kim of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for a New American Security. "But Seoul's hands could be tied if public sentiment heats up against Japan unless his administration conducts trilateral cooperation in private with Washington and Tokyo without publicizing it." MDT/AP

Philippines ready to back US if it gets embroiled in war

THE Philippine president is ready to open the country's "facilities" to American forces under a 1951 mutual defense treaty if Russia's war against Ukraine turns for the worse and embroils the United States in the fighting, Manila's ambassador to Washington said yesterday.

Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez said President Rodrigo Duterte made the remarks in a recent meeting in Manila where the president also expressed concern over the global economic impact of the unfolding crisis. The Philippines has condemned the invasion and voted yes on a U.N. General Assembly resolution that demanded an immediate halt to Moscow's attack and the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Ukraine.

Duterte, whose stormy six-year term ends in June,



has nurtured closer ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping while often criticizing U.S. security policies in the first years of his presidency. But Romualdez said Duterte told him that the Russian invasion was wrong.

"He says if they're asking for the support of the Phi-

lippines, it's very clear that, of course, if push comes to shove, the Philippines will be ready to be part of the effort, especially if this Ukrainian crisis spills over to the Asian region," Romualdez said in an online briefing with Manila-based journalists. "Give them the assurance that if ever needed, the Philippines is

ready to offer whatever facilities or whatever things that the United States will need being a major — our number one ally."

Duterte did not specify in his remarks which Philippine facilities American forces would gain access to, but Romualdez said these could include the sprawling Clark and Subic

Bay freeports northwest of Manila that used to be among the largest American air and naval bases outside the U.S. mainland until U.S. forces withdrew from them in the early 1990s.

There was no immediate comment from Duterte or his office.

The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty commits the United States and the Philippines to come to the aid of the other in case of an attack. American officials have repeatedly assured their Philippine counterparts in recent years that they would honor their treaty obligations if Filipino forces, ships or aircraft come under attack in the disputed South China Sea, including by China.

U.S. national security officials have scheduled a meeting at the White House with ambassadors of the

Association of Southeast Asian nations this week to discuss the widening sanctions imposed by the U.S. on Russia, including President Joe Biden's ban on Russian oil imports, Romualdez said.

Romualdez also said he learned that Ukraine has appealed to many nations, including the Philippines, "to stop doing business with Russia" but said he was unaware if the request has been officially conveyed to Manila.

Another topic at the meeting with U.S. officials this week is Biden's invitation to ASEAN heads of state to take part in a special U.S. summit on March 28. The 76-year-old Duterte may skip the event because it falls on his birthday and also because it will occur during the busy Philippine elections season, Romualdez said. MDT/AP

PUTIN'S WAR

White House warns Russia may use chemical weapons in Ukraine

THE Biden administration publicly warned yesterday [Macau time] that Russia might seek to use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine as the White House rejected Russian claims of illegal chemical weapons development in the country it has invaded.

This week, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — without evidence — accused Ukraine of running chemical and biological weapons labs with U.S. support. White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Russia's claim "preposterous" and said it could be part of an attempt by Russia to lay the groundwork for its own use of such weapons of mass destruction against Ukraine.

"This is all an obvious ploy by Russia to try to justify its further premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine," Psaki tweeted yesterday. "Now that Russia has made these false claims, and China has seemingly endorsed this propaganda, we should all be on the lookout for Russia to possibly use chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine, or to create a false flag operation using them."

The U.S. for months has warned about Russian "false flag" operations to create



White House press secretary Jen Psaki

a pretext for the invasion. The warning suggested Russia might seek to create a pretense for further escalating the two-week old conflict that has seen the Russian offensive slowed by stronger-than-expected Ukrainian defenders, but not stopped.

Dmitry Chumakov, a Russian deputy U.N. ambassador, repeated the accusation yesterday, urging Western media to cover "the news about secret biological laboratories in Ukraine."

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby called the Russian claim "a bunch of malarkey."

The international community for years has asses-

sed that Russia has used chemical weapons before in carrying out assassination attempts against Putin enemies like Alexey Navalny and former spy Sergei Skripal. Russia also supports the Assad government in Syria, which has used chemical weapons against its people in a decade-long civil war.

Asked by a Russian journalist about the claims, United Nations spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "At this point have no information to confirm these reports or these allegations about these kinds of labs."

"Our colleagues at the World Health Organization, who have been working with the Ukrainian Govern-

ments, said they are unaware of any activity on the part of the Ukrainian Government which is inconsistent with its international treaty obligations, including on chemical weapons or biological weapons," Dujarric added.

Russia has a long history of spreading disinformation about U.S. biological weapons research. In the 1980s, Russian intelligence spread the conspiracy theory that the U.S. created HIV in a lab. More recently, Russian state media have spread theories about dangerous research at labs in Ukraine and Georgia.

The conspiracy theory about U.S.-run labs in Ukraine has been picked up by Chinese state-controlled media and is now circulating in online message boards popular with COVID-19 conspiracy theorists and far-right groups in the U.S.

Filippa Lentzos, a senior lecturer in science and international security at King's College London, said there are no "U.S. labs" in Ukraine. Instead, she said in an email, there are labs in the country that have received money through a U.S. Defense Department threat reduction program.

"These are public and animal health facilities that are owned and operated by Ukraine," she said. **MDT/AP**

South Africa. He said it's still unclear when the pandemic might end, but said the low death toll during the omicron surge was striking.

Many scientists have credited that to the booster immunization programs undertaken in numerous rich countries, which have broken the connection between COVID-19 infection and severe disease.

Earlier this week, an expert group convened by WHO said it "strongly supports urgent and broad access" to booster doses of COVID-19 vaccine amid the global spread of omicron, capping a reversal of the U.N. agency's repeated insistence last year that boosters weren't necessary for healthy people. **MDT/AP**

this day in history

1985 GORBACHEV BECOMES SOVIET LEADER



There is a new man in charge at the Kremlin - Mikhail Gorbachev has taken over following the death of Konstantin Chernenko.

Chernenko, 73, died yesterday after a long illness - but his death was only announced to the Soviet people this morning. Sombre music preceded the news on radio and television and scheduled programmes were cancelled.

The speed of naming of his successor - at 54 the youngest man to take over as general secretary of the Soviet communist party - has taken people by surprise.

In another break with tradition, Mr Gorbachev has announced arms talks with the Americans in Geneva will go ahead tomorrow.

Chernenko lasted only 13 months in the top job. He was in poor health when he was appointed and his death was caused by heart failure brought on by problems with his lungs and liver.

He is the third Soviet leader to die in just over two years. Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982 after 18 years in power. He was 75. Yuri Andropov died 18 months later aged 69.

The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher will attend Chernenko's funeral on Wednesday - but the United States President Ronald Reagan will not be going.

The BBC's Moscow correspondent, Tim Sebastian, says Mr Gorbachev's appointment marks a dramatic change in leadership in Moscow.

He says Mr Gorbachev is a dynamic figure who has moved rapidly through the Soviet hierarchy.

"There seems little doubt the Gorbachev administration will look different. More outgoing, more approachable, more concerned with its public image," he reported.

"But its aims and its approach seem likely to be familiar. Despite his lively and flexible manner, Gorbachev is still a strict, orthodox Marxist in no sense has he shown himself to be a liberal."

Mr Gorbachev's acceptance speech gave a hint of the changes to come. He spoke of his desire to freeze the deployment of weapons and reduce the international nuclear weapons stockpiles.

Mrs Thatcher has already indicated her approval at his appointment. Following his recent visit to Britain, she said: "I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together."

Courtesy BBC News

COVID-19

CASES, DEATHS CONTINUE TO DROP GLOBALLY, WHO SAYS

THE number of new coronavirus cases and deaths globally have continued to fall in the past week, the World Health Organization said, with only the Western Pacific reporting an increase in COVID-19.

In its latest report on the pandemic issued yesterday [Macau time], the U.N. health agency said new COVID-19 infections dropped by 5% in the last week, continuing a declining trend that started more than a month ago. Deaths were also down by 8% and have been falling globally for

the last two weeks.

Only the Western Pacific saw a rise in coronavirus cases, reporting a 46% increase. In the last week, Hong Kong has been recording about 150 deaths per day, giving it the world's highest death rate per 1 million people, according to data from Oxford University.

The highly infectious omicron variant has recently overwhelmed the semi-autonomous Chinese city, prompting mass quarantines, supermarket panic buying and even the city's

morgues are overflowing, forcing authorities to store bodies in refrigerated shipping containers.

Elsewhere, COVID-19 is falling significantly; the biggest declines were seen in the Middle East and Africa, where cases dropped by 46% and 40%, respectively.

"The mildness of the omicron wave, its low death toll and the fact that it is rapidly disappearing, has created the widespread impression that COVID-19 is over," said Salim Abdool Karim of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in

IN CONTEXT

Mikhail Gorbachev radically changed the course of Soviet foreign policy, signing a number of agreements with the United States on nuclear disarmament. He introduced a policy of openness or "glasnost" and he was also the architect of "perestroika" or deep political and economic reforms. But his reforms led to severe economic hardship at home. Growing nationalist movements spearheaded by the Baltic states led him to propose a loose federation of Soviet states. But this proved the last straw for communist hardliners. In August 1991 he survived a coup attempt - largely thanks to the support of the Russian authorities, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin continued to attract more support which led eventually to the resignation of Gorbachev on 25 December 1991. The Soviet flag, the hammer and sickle, was lowered for the last time on 31 December. Gorbachev is now president of the Green Cross - an organisation concerned with the clean-up of chemical and biological weapons. His wife Raisa, the only wife of a Soviet leader to become a public figure in recent times, died of leukaemia in 1999.

DRIVE IN

IN 'THE ADAM PROJECT,' A BLOCKBUSTER THERAPY SESSION

LINDSEY BAHR,
MDT/AP FILM WRITER

PATHOS and action are found in equal parts in "The Adam Project," the latest attempt by Netflix to create the kind of throwback blockbuster that you might have paid to see in movie theaters.

Starring Ryan Reynolds as a time traveling pilot and directed by Shawn Levy, the movie takes the old cliché about what you'd tell your younger self and adds PG-13 snark, space action, "Guardians of the Galaxy" energy, a megalomaniac businesswoman, a dead father and a lost love to the mix. And it's pretty satisfying popcorn fare with some genuinely affecting beats. All that's missing is some Harry Chapin.

This is a project that has been around for a decade — at one point Tom Cruise was attached. But it languished in development and rewrites (there are four screenwriters credited and Jonathan Tropper is the last to have touched it) until Netflix acquired it and in less than two years it's a



From left: Ryan Reynolds, Mark Ruffalo and Walker Scobell in a scene from "The Adam Project"

finished product.

In "The Adam Project," we're introduced to a 40-something Adam (Reynolds) in the middle of a space chase. He's quick-witted and unflappable, so it's supposed to be jarring to cut back to see middle school Adam (Walker

Scobell in his debut) as the little guy with the big mouth who is prone to getting in fights and losing.

Adam and his mom (Jennifer Garner) are hanging on by a thread in the year after they lost his dad (Mark Ruffalo) in an ac-

cident. But before things get too real, adult Adam shows up in the past at their house and breaks all the known time travel rules when he accidentally runs into young Adam. This is a movie universe in which "Back to the Future 2" exists.

Adult Adam isn't there for young Adam, he just needs to treat his wound before going to look for his wife (Zoe Saldana). The older self is dismissive, the younger one is desperate to know when he'll start getting ripped and having luck with girls. Reynolds and Scobell are a good match.

And of course adult Adam is on a journey to make peace with his younger self and his parents — Mom takes five minutes at a bar (it's a good scene) and Dad takes the rest of the film. This is ultimately a film about boys and their dads.

Levy is a director who has found a successful lane in studio-made crowd pleasers like "Date Night," "Night at the Museum" and "Free Guy," which also starred Reynolds. While they might not be the kind of things that are

taught in film school, they do have their place as uncynical, nostalgic and rewatchable popcorn fare (even Amblin-esque, if we must) with just enough heart to make you feel like you haven't consumed junk food.

But nostalgia can be a tricky game for people outside of the dominant group and "The Adam Project" filmmakers could benefit from a little post-game introspection about the fact that they've made a loving film about family and forgiveness and made the villain a highly successful businesswoman (Catherine Keener) whose origin story stems from her bitterness about having no husband or children because she devoted her life to work.

Levy has said he wants his films to have ideas in them, and while there's some nice ones in "The Adam Project," the existence of Keener's character signals that ladies better find time for kids and mates before it's too late.

In other words, "The Adam Project" should have taken a note from one of its own lessons: The only way to save the future is to reconcile with the past.

"The Adam Project," a Netflix release out today, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "Language, violence, action and suggestive references." Running time: 106 minutes. ★★★★★

AD

合夥人 PARTNERS:

- 官樂怡 Rui José da Cunha °
- 山度士 Álvaro Rodrigues °
- 馬天龍 Nuno Sardinha da Mata °
- 趙魯 Zhao Lu *°
- 馬傑安 João Nogueira Marques

大律師 ASSOCIATES:

- 高文軒 Adelino Correia °
- 羅善齡 Zelina Rodrigues *
- 白秀蘭 Susana Batalha
- 馬潔冰 Maria João Marques
- 陶義德 António Isó de Azevedo
- 白穎怡 Iolita Berenguel
- 沈玲鳳 Mariana Afonso Esteves
- 馬秀文 Sofia Mendes Martins
- 飛嘉華 Carlos dos Santos Ferreira °
- 杜力信 Nelson de Azevedo
- 宋哲言 João Gonçalves Assunção
- 莫永誠 Rui Velez de Moura
- 安東尼 António Manuel dos Santos
- 巴慧雅 Vera Bastos
- 歐文傑 Miguel Evaristo
- 陳芷喬 Joana Chan
- 顏曉蓉 Teresa Xiaorong Yan
- 諾瑪莉 Maria Noras
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- 潘卡莉 Candice Pun
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- 伍福賢 Domingos Ng
- 劉慧敏 Amanda Liu
- 楊詩婷 Si Teng leong

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TASTE OF EDESIA

Jiangnan and Cantonese wonders

IRENE SAM, MDT

SPRING is finally here and The Ritz-Carlton Macau is inviting Chef Jack Yu to bring Jiangnan flavours to its Michelin-starred Chinese restaurant Lai Heen. He will partner with Executive Chef Jackie Ho to design an interactive spectacle that represents the best of Cantonese and Jiangnan cuisines. From March 18 to 20, the menu will provide enthusiasts with an experience that showcases the extraordinary techniques and creativity of two acclaimed Chinese chefs.

Originally from Hangzhou, Chef Jack Yu has an illustrious career spanning three decades, and has served as executive chef and culinary consultant for an array of esteemed dining establishments around the country. Today he is best known as the helmer of Jie Xiang Lou restaurant at Seven Villas Resort Hangzhou. It is regarded as one of the city's top restaurants and has been awarded the prestigious Black Pearl One Diamond by the Black Pearl Restaurant Guide for three consecutive years.

Chef Yu's À-la-carte Menu boasts some of the most iconic dishes in his repertoire. The Pomegranate Dumpling Stuffed with Parma Ham, Mushroom and Bamboo Shoot, includes a combination of fresh, premium ingredients and encasing them inside thin tofu sheets. The result is a pomegranate-shaped mor-



sel that packs an incredible slew of texture and umami inside its bitesize body. Meanwhile, the Steamed Crab with Marinated Tender Rib—featuring Hangzhou crab, Shaoxing wine and Ningbo spareribs marinated in rice wine lees—is a celebration of classic ingredients and delicacies from Zhejiang province. Steamed

in chicken fat, the dish is divinely aromatic and flavourful, making it one of the must-haves on the menu. Additional highlights include appetisers such as the Passion Fruit Flavoured Crispy Eel and the Sea Snail in Spicy Wine Sauce, and the entrée Hangzhou Style Fried Potato with Carrot and Mixed Vegetables.

F&B CURATED LUXURY

DURING March and April, DFS Group is partnering with City of Dreams Macau to present its tenth annual Masters of Wines and Spirits exhibition at T Galleria by DFS, Macau, City of Dreams for the very first time. The exhibition will feature an exclusive collection of more than 100 of the world's rarest and finest wines, spirits and champagnes from 65 world-renowned brands and houses.

The Masters Series is a showcase of innovation in curating exclusive products and creating exceptional experiences. Masters of Wines and Spirits is a celebration of the world's finest industry ex-

pertise and The Masters of Wines and Spirits pop-up, which is open to the public and housed exclusively at City of Dreams Macau, will feature cognac, champagne, whiskey and wine display zones; each presenting unique or exclusive pieces. For viewers that seek to understand more product details, the origin, narrative or uniqueness of each lot, QR codes are provided at ease to be scanned next to each display, allowing viewers to be whisked away to explore the full collection and more. In addition, The Masters Bar will be open throughout March and April, bringing exclusive tastings, activations and guest bartenders.



MISO SOUP

INGREDIENTS

Miso Paste
500ml Water
Bean Curd / Tofu
Spring Onions
Seaweed



KNOW HOW

Bring water to boil
Add miso paste
Gently Cube bean curd / tofu
Add Seaweed
Finish with spring onions



RECIPES

www.eighty8s.com



BY ALEX TORRÃO
MDT

OPINION

World Views

Amanda Seitz, MDT/AP



GAS PRICE HIKES FUELING ELECTRIC VEHICLE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Some social media users suggest that soaring fuel prices in the U.S. aren't the result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, increased consumption or supply chain issues as daily life resumes after two years of stagnation brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

Instead, the flurry of Facebook and Twitter posts offer, without evidence, that a nefarious scheme is underway: President Joe Biden's administration is intentionally driving up the price of gas to get more American drivers behind the wheel of an electric car.

"\$6.00 a gallon gas is how you get people to buy electric cars," claims one popular meme, shared thousands of times across Facebook and Instagram since Tuesday.

The newest internet fabrication shows that Americans' obsession with conspiracy theories continues to play an outsized role in how they interpret political decision-making, even during times of war.

"At this point, conspiracy theories have become so ingrained in people's psyche and because of social media, they spread like wildfire," said Mia Bloom, a Georgia State University professor who recently authored a book examining the QAnon conspiracy theory. "If it's not this conspiracy theory this week, it'll be another one next week."

The conspiracy theory-laden memes, Twitter posts and videos began swirling as the average price of regular gas broke \$4 a gallon for the first time in nearly 14 years. The output of posts increased Tuesday after Biden announced a ban on Russian oil imports, a move he warned would almost certainly drive up U.S. gas prices further but would deal a "blow" to Russian President Vladimir Putin's offensive in Ukraine.

The claims about electric vehicles echo the core themes at the center of several conspiracy theories peddled at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic by followers of QAnon, a conspiracy theory that cast then-President Donald Trump as a hero fighting a cabal of elites who operate child sex trafficking rings. Many QAnon social media accounts pushed false conspiracy theories that the government would try to microchip people with a vaccine or that a coin shortage during the pandemic was a plot to push Americans into a cashless society that would be easier for the federal government to control.

The electric vehicle appears to be the latest reiteration of those conspiracy theories.

"Conspiracy theories provide such comfort during these very stressful times," she said.

Mentions of "electric cars" and the "government" have increased by 400% over the last four days across public social media accounts, news websites and television news, according to an analysis social media intelligence firm Signal Labs conducted for The Associated Press.

The spike in conversation also was driven by conservative social media accounts that seized on comments made Monday by Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg during an event with Vice President Kamala Harris. The pair promoted the federal government's funding for public transportation and electric vehicles under Biden's infrastructure law passed last year.

"Last month, we announced \$5 billion to build out a nationwide electric vehicle charging network so the people from rural to suburban to urban communities can all benefit from the gas savings from driving an EV," Buttigieg said.

But misleading posts across social media took Buttigieg's comments out of context, suggesting that he was responding directly to the recent jump in gas prices by telling people to buy electric vehicles. Some posts claimed Buttigieg's answer to rising gas prices was for Americans to buy a "\$50,000 electric car."

"Pete Buttigieg says if we don't like gas prices, we should change vehicles," claimed one post, shared thousands of times across Facebook and Instagram.

Buttigieg, appearing to respond the claims, shared a website link that lists electric car prices that range from \$27,400 to \$181,450 on Twitter.

"Seeing some strange claims about EV prices out there," Buttigieg wrote in the tweet.

[Abridged]

NO BREAKTHROUGH IN UKRAINE-RUSSIA TALKS

Ukraine's foreign minister says talks between the top diplomats of Moscow and Kyiv produced no breakthrough on ending the war in Ukraine following Russia's invasion.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he attended the meeting yesterday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Turkey to discuss humanitarian corridors and a cease-fire.

Kuleba said there are "other decision-makers" in Russia who need to be consulted, adding that he agreed with Lavrov to continue to seek a solution to humanitarian issues caused by the war.

He said Moscow is not ready to offer a cease-fire. He said: "They

seek Ukraine's surrender. This is not going to happen."

Kuleba said "the last thing" he wanted was to kill hope for Ukrainians seeking safe passage out of cities besieged by Russian bombardments and attacks.

Russia's foreign minister is dismissing concerns about Russian military attacks on civilians, including on a maternity hospital, as "pathetic shrieks" from its enemies.

In the Russian government's first public comment on Wednesday's strike on a maternity hospital in the besieged city of Mariupol, Lavrov didn't deny or shy away from responsibility for the attack.



People wearing face masks get haircut at a salon after temporarily closing in Hong Kong

CHINA FIGHTS NEW COVID-19 SPIKE WITH MORE SELECTIVE APPROACH

CHINA is tackling a COVID-19 spike with selective lockdowns and other measures that appear to slightly ease its draconian "zero tolerance" strategy.

In Hong Kong, where experts say the city's worst outbreak to date may have peaked, barber shops and hair salons reopened Thursday. Still, many are seeing that as an example of mixed messages from the government of the semi-autonomous Chinese territory that has been ordered to follow the "zero tolerance" approach used on the mainland.

Hong Kong authorities reported 31,392 local infections yesterday, down from over 50,000 infections the previous day.

On the mainland, the 402 cases of local transmission reported yesterday were quadruple the number of cases a week ago. Of those, 165 were in the northeastern province of Jilin, mainly in the cities of Changchun and Jilin, where city authorities locked down 160 residential communities where multiple cases have been detected.

Three rounds of mass testing in Jilin city have

also been completed, inter-city transport links suspended and all residents advised to stay home until numbers drop. Non-essential businesses and snow recreation areas were closed.

Drivers and passengers of private cars, buses and taxis entering or exiting Changchun must present negative tests for the coronavirus taken within the past 48 hours.

Authorities attributed the Jilin provincial outbreak to the highly contagious omicron variant, with more than 1,200 cases recorded nationwide since Friday, some of the highest numbers since the pandemic began spreading from the central city of Wuhan in 2020.

Still, control measures were less strict than in the past, in a possible sign that China is beginning to relax its "zero tolerance" approach to the pandemic. As recently as January, China was locking down entire cities, affecting millions of people.

In his annual report on the work of government delivered Saturday, Premier Li Keqiang said China needs to "constantly refine epidemic contain-

ment" but gave no direct indication Beijing was abandoning "zero tolerance."

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said Wednesday that reducing deaths is the city's priority. Hong Kong is dedicating several hospitals to COVID-19 treatment and building an emergency hospital that will be staffed by medical workers from the mainland.

Lam also said there was no updated schedule for a mass-testing plan in Hong Kong that was initially expected to occur this month but was put on hold.

Hong Kong has seen more than 600,000 infections since the latest wave began at the end of December.

Hair salons in the city reopened yesterday after being ordered to close for a month as part of tough social-distancing restrictions.

"It's good that we are allowed to open and have business although there's still more than 20,000 to 30,000 daily cases," said Andy Cheung, the owner of an express salon.

"But still, it's good that we can serve the community," he said. **MDT/AP**



UK A ban on transfers and selling new tickets were among unprecedented restrictions placed on Chelsea by the British government yesterday after owner Roman Abramovich was sanctioned over Russia's war on Ukraine. The reigning European and world champions have to operate under a special government "Russia Regulations" license that stymies Abramovich's rapid plan to sell the club. However, Chelsea is allowed to keep playing.

Davos The World Economic Forum, best known as the host of an annual meeting of elites in Davos, Switzerland, says it's freezing all its relations with Russian entities following the invasion of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin last participated in the event at a virtual "Davos Agenda" meeting in January 2021. Previously, he attended the event in person.



Cambodia The Association of Southeast Asian Nations is seeking to reschedule a summit meeting of its leaders with U.S. President Joe Biden, Cambodian and Indonesian officials said yesterday. Cambodian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Chum Sounry explained in a statement sent yesterday that the proposed March 28-29 dates "were not convenient for our leaders due to their respective heavy agenda." Cambodia is this year's chair of the regional grouping, known as ASEAN.



India PM Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party had a commanding lead in India's most populous state as votes were counted yesterday, despite his government's criticized handling of COVID-19, soaring unemployment and farmer protests. Trends in the poll data showed the Bharatiya Janata Party comfortably leading in Uttar Pradesh state in polls that were seen as a crucial test for Modi's popularity before national elections in 2024.